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A push for cars to get better gas mileage

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A key dispute is whether proposed fuel standards should apply equally to all vehicles.

The confluence of skyrocketing gasoline prices, new reports on climate change, and the never-ending debate over US energy policy sharpens efforts to encourage - if not mandate - better gas mileage in the cars Americans drive.

New legislation is being introduced, and President Bush has asked Congress to give him the authority to increase passenger-car fuel economy standards. Many observers say he already has that authority, as have a succession of presidents since Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards were initially set 31 years ago.

Environmental groups voice their support

"I would love to believe that President Bush has finally seen the light on this," says Daniel Becker, director of the global-warming program at the Sierra Club, a grass-roots environmental organization.

Like the Union of Concerned Scientists, a nonprofit environmental group of scientists and citizens, as well as other supporters of more rigorous CAFE standards, Mr. Becker asserts that the technology already exists to make all new vehicles average 40 miles per gallon within 10 years.

"Taking this step would save the average driver over \$5,000 over the lifetime of their vehicle, even after accounting for the added cost of the fuel-saving technology," he says. "At the same time, raising fuel economy standards would save 4 million barrels of oil per day - an amount equal to what America currently imports from the entire Persian Gulf and could ever get out of the Arctic Refuge, combined."

Union of Concerned Scientists researcher David Friedman projects that driving a 40 m.p.g. car "would be the equivalent of offering a \$600 annual tax break from reduced fuel costs."

Such figures are necessarily hypothetical, depending on a number of variables such as the cost of a barrel of oil. There also are political considerations: the safety of an SUV compared with a smaller hybrid, as well as jobs in the domestic auto industry, which has been hurting recently.

Administration opposes universal increase

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta warned about a universal increase in fuel efficiency for all new cars. "Substantial increases in CAFE standards under the current single standard approach would increase fatalities on America's highways, raise healthcare costs, and reduce employment," he said in a recent letter to

congressional leaders.

As with the new CAFE rule for light trucks introduced in March, the Bush administration prefers a "size-based" system, setting separate fuel economy targets for each vehicle based on its dimensions.

"Under a size-based system, automakers will still be able to build the cars consumers want, but those cars will have to be more fuel efficient across the board," Secretary Mineta told the House Committee on Energy and Commerce Thursday. "A size-based system ensures that all manufacturers are introducing fuel-saving technologies, not only the manufacturers of larger vehicles."

Enacted in 1975 in the wake of the 1973 Arab oil embargo, CAFE requires US automakers to meet an average fuel economy level of 27.5 miles per gallon. Domestically manufactured cars have become more fuel efficient since then, but are not nearly at the level as their foreign rivals.

Now, the number of vehicles on US roads is more than 200 million. These include SUVs, vans, pickups, and other relative guzzlers lumped together as "light trucks," which don't have to meet the same standard.

"While vehicle fuel efficiency has improved, vehicle miles traveled has increased an average of about 1.7 percent per year for the past 30 years with a net result of little impact on energy conservation," said Frederick Webber, president of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers at a House committee hearing last week.

Passenger cars now account for 23 percent of US domestic oil consumption, according to Mineta. At a time of war in Iraq, rumors of a possible war with Iran, and political changes in other oil-producing countries (such as Bolivia, which just announced that it will nationalize its oil and gas resources), that increasingly highlights the need for conservation as well as more fuel-efficient vehicles.

In Washington Friday, a bipartisan group of five senators introduced legislation that would offer government loan guarantees and grants to automakers and parts manufacturers. The bill would speed up development of vehicle technology designed to conserve fuel. This includes using lightweight materials, being able to plug in and recharge batteries of gas-electric hybrids, and making alternative fuels more available around the country.

Another bipartisan bill would raise the CAFE standard for cars and light trucks to 33 m.p.g. Rep. Edward Markey (D) of Massachusetts, one of the bill's sponsors, has pointed out that the fleetwide average fuel economy peaked in 1987 at 26.2 miles per gallon, and is now below 25 miles per gallon.

States sue for increase in gas mileage

Meanwhile, pressure to increase gas mileage is coming from other quarters as well.

Ten states last week sued the federal government for gas mileage requirements that they say are too low for SUVs and pickup trucks. (The states are: California, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Vermont. New York City and the District of Columbia also joined the suit.) Around the country, political leaders in 227 cities from New York to Los

Angeles have signed the "US Mayors Climate Protection Agreement," which commits them to reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

Gasoline-burning motor vehicles are a prime emitter of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas that most climate scientists say is causing global warming. There has been "a continuing, steady rise in the amount of heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere," the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported recently in its Annual Greenhouse Gas Index.

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